

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Early Signs of Spring

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The dawn chorus, the call of the cuckoo, boxing hares, wild garlic, frogspawn ... all early signs of spring (seriously, I looked it up). And another sign of spring: me asking growers to weigh in on their early season shipments of bedding plants.

When I was a Central Florida grower, we marked the beginning of spring sales at Valentine's Day. As I write this, it's one day shy of the romantic holiday, but it's not too early to ask a few of my southern grower friends if there are any signs that Spring 2023 will be a good one. Or, conversely, a bad one.

Metrolina Greenhouses is located in North Carolina, where spring will NOT break on Valentine's Day. But they ship south, so I was hoping Abe VanWingerden might have some insights. Plus, Abe keeps fantastic records and his answers are always data-based.

Abe first replied that it's way too early to make any judgement calls about the season, but he said they're doing daily business at about 300 of their 1,400 big-box retail outlets, so the season is commencing. But first Abe referenced the cause of the somewhat dismal 2022 season.

"Our data/metrics/analysis says 2022 was most impacted by weather. We have consumer data that shows some people just did not get out and garden even though they had planned to and they still plan to garden in 2023."

That's good news!

Then he offered this analysis of January and February thus far: "Even though January 2023 was not a great weather month in comparison to 2022 (just average compared to last year), we had good sales and consumers seem to be engaged for 2023. For the first 10 days of February, the weather was warmer than usual and our throughput on the same shipments as last year is up significantly. This is great, as moving through the first wave of product successfully (even though a small part of the business) is key to building momentum in the business. Consumers have come out strong as the weather turns and we are seeing solid positive growth day by day. But the March 15 to May 15 period still drives it for us. Good signs to start, though, and we are not seeing decreased traffic or trends on similar days vs. last year."

More good news! No hints that consumers are worried about their personal economic outlook or are finding alternative places to spend their money. It seems that good weather equals good traffic.

Rick Brown, owner of Riverview Flower Farm in Seffner, Florida, just northeast of Tampa, sent me this succinct-but-positive reply from his iPhone: "Very strong start in Florida. We are having great weather after a frosty early January and sales are surging."

Hard to read anything negative into that missive.

Another Floridian, Jim Pugh, director of horticulture for American Farms in Naples, also replied in an optimistic tone.

"I can report to you that our local Florida market appears to be very strong. And if you saw the farm today you'd wonder what's going on, as we are selling everything as fast as we can get it ready."

Jim reported some cold weather that slowed plant growth a bit, but as soon as it warmed up, demand from all their sectors—IGCs, landscapers and big boxes—has been brisk.

"If what we are experiencing down here in Florida is any indication of what the northern growers might expect this spring, then I'm wondering if many producers may have swung the pendulum too far in the conservative direction."

Interesting point, Jim. Personally, I don't think there's anything wrong with taking a conservative approach to production numbers. Many of the most profitable greenhouses I know operate that way every season. I'll admit, it's gratifying when spring weather is almost flawless and your gamble to overfill the greenhouse pays off. But how often does that happen? Two or three seasons out of 10? It's better to sell out and meet your goal than throw product away.

Which leads to a final point: Weather was our biggest enemy in 2022 and it seems weather will be the make-it-or-break-it factor in 2023. It won't be the price of eggs or mortgage rates, or we'd already be seeing some signs of that.

So if you're going to lose sleep this spring, do it over how to grow perfect crops and not whether or not you'll sell them. **GT**